Gender and Age Differences in the Importance of Physical Attractiveness: Advertising Presentations and Motives For Comparison For Pre-Adolescent Children'

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The study investigates the importance of physical attractiveness across the sexes, focusing on possible differences in the motives for social comparison held by first and fifth grade males and females when they view advertisements with attractive models. In-depth interviews were conducted with 90 children, and differences across both sex and age were observed. Younger females and males in both age groups were less likely to compare socially at all, in large part due to less similarity being perceived between themselves and the models. Self-evaluation (with the commonly associated negative consequences, i.e., loss of self-esteem) was observed only in fifth grade females. Self-evaluation among younger children was more positive, as the perceived similarity to models represented their "growing up." Self-improvement for young children consisted more of "having" the products advertised, rather than in improving one's physical body. Self-enhancement was observed frequently, though in a milder form than discussed in previous literature, as children frequently denigrated certain aspects of the advertisements in apparent attempts to maintain self-esteem.

The U. S. society pays great attention to physical attractiveness, a phenomenon not unique to our culture nor to our time in history. Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) noted that the belief in a positive relationship between beauty and "goodness" is common and can be traced back to philosophers such as Plato. For example, Foucault (1978) noted in Western cultures that one's body has been interpreted as a material sign of the moral character "within." The prominence of advertising in our society, coupled with a lenient regulatory environment, has resulted in much attention being paid to the role of advertising in promoting "harmful" standards of physical attractiveness, especially for females.

The importance of physical attractiveness varies across the sexes, and an extensive literature exists to support the existence of those differences. In addition, the possible negative consequences of an exaggerated concern with physical attractiveness (eating disorders for young females and steroid use for young males) are far more common for females. One question frequently asked is: Why do these sex differences occur? Of concern to marketers then is the role, if any, that advertising may play in
contributing to differences between boys and girls with respect to the differential importance of physical attractiveness, and the consequences of being exposed to physically attractive models in ads. Ogletree et al. (1990) found that children's advertising, with the exception of food-related ads, emphasizes appearance-enhancement appeals for girls far more often than for boys. It may be simply that the relative frequency of advertising appeals with physically attractive models fosters sex differences in the importance of physical attractiveness, but there may also be differences in the sexes' reactions to such appeals.

This study investigates sex and age differences in reactions to gendered-advertising among pre-adolescents, examining the motives held for making social comparisons (Festinger 1954; Wood 1989). Social comparison theory suggests that people evaluate their own status by comparing themselves to similar others; in the context of gendered advertising, the claim is made that comparisons are made with models in the ads. The failure on the part of many females to self-compare favorably has resulted in criticisms of the promotion of an emaciated standard of "beauty" (Miller 1994; Stephens, Hill, and Hanson 1994). We are attempting to investigate why advertising apparently affects young females far more than young males in terms of developing an emphasis on physical attractiveness, via the use of personal interviews (versus the more commonly used pencil and paper methods) with younger children.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

Physical attractiveness is considered to be important by children and adolescents, and it consistently appears to be a significant factor in determining both males' and females' levels of global self-esteem (Harter 1993; Mathes and Kahn 1975; Rosenberg 1986). Even in infants as young as two months, preferences for physical attractiveness have been found, and this preference continues into adolescence (Dion 1973, 1977; Harter 1993; Langlois and Stephan 1981; Langlois et al. 1987, Vaughn and Langlois 1983). We argue that social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) provides the link between the documented importance of physical attractiveness in others and the individual's own self esteem.

While being physically attractive is important to all people, it is more important to females. For example, Dion (1973) found that physical attractiveness has reward properties for most children three to six years old, but especially for females. Self-perceptions of physical attractiveness are decidedly more negative among females than males (Burton, Nemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1994; Harter 1993; Rosenberg 1986) and appear to decrease throughout adolescence (Harter 1993; Simmons and Blyth 1987; Simmons, Rosenberg and Rosenberg 1973). Male self-esteem, on the other hand, tends to increase from early adolescence through adulthood (Block and Robins 1993). This increase in self-esteem may stem partly from males not displaying as much distortion in body image (Fallon and Rozin 1985; Stiegel-Moore, Silberstein, and Rodin 1986) and eating attitudes (Rosen, Gross, and Vara 1987) or as much dissatisfaction with their bodies as females (Paxton et al. 1991; Rauste-von Wright 1989).

Differences also exist between males and females as to what constitutes a desirable body image. Franzoi and Herzog (1987), for example, found that female college students' body esteem is largely determined by weight, while male college students' body esteem is
largely determined by upper body strength. Fallon and Rozin (1985) argue that men possess a broader latitude of acceptance in terms of physical appearance than women, who have well-defined perceptions of the ideal appearance. Beliefs about appropriate methods of improving physical attractiveness also vary. Burton, et al. (1994) found that females hold relatively more positive views toward dieting, the likelihood of cosmetic surgery, clothing concerns, sunbathing, and dysfunctional eating attitudes, while males are more positive concerning exercise as a means of weight control and steroid usage.

ADVERTISING AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON INFORMATION

Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) has been used in marketing studies to explain how the physical attractiveness of models in ads may contribute to low self-perceptions of physical attractiveness (Martin and Kennedy 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Richins 1991, 1992). In short, Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison states that (1) people have a drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities; (2) in the absence of "objective" bases for comparison, this need can be satisfied by "social" comparison with other people; and (3) such social comparisons will, when possible, be made with similar others. Most work has assumed that the motive for social comparison was self evaluation as originally suggested by Festinger (1954). More recent work has provided evidence, however, that social comparison may occur for other reasons besides self-evaluation, with others who are dissimilar, and for the evaluation of personal traits and circumstances (see Wood 1989).

Recent research in marketing (Martin 1995; Martin, Gentry, and Kennedy 1996; Martin and Kennedy 1994a) has investigated the role of other motives for comparison in explaining the inconsistent findings in the marketing (Martin and Kennedy 1993; Richins 1991) and psychology (Cash, Cash, and Butters 1983; Stice and Shaw 1994; Thornton and Moore 1993) literatures as to the consequences of comparisons to highly attractive others such as advertising models. Specifically, three motives have been found to exist in social comparison processes:

1. Self-evaluation -- judging the value or worth of one's abilities, opinions, or personal traits;
2. Self-improvement -- attempting to learn how to improve or to be inspired to improve a particular attribute; and
3. Self-enhancement -- attempting to maintain positive views of oneself to protect or enhance one's self-esteem; this attempt is generally seen as biased in that one may choose a particular target or strategy so that self-esteem is protected or enhanced. An alternative approach is to avoid social comparisons, thus circumventing the possibility of comparing unfavorably.

As noted earlier, early motive-oriented studies of the role of advertising models assumed that self-evaluation was the motive for social comparison. Exposure to highly attractive models temporarily raises females college students' (Richins 1991) and adolescents' (Martin and Kennedy 1993) comparison standards for physical attractiveness. Wood (1989) and Wood and Taylor (1991) note that self-improvement and self-enhancement can also apply to the upward comparison processes studied in marketing, and that downward social comparison processes may occur,
usually associated with the self-enhancement motive. Using survey instruments as well as projective tests, Martin and Kennedy (1994a) found female pre-adolescents' and adolescents' motives for comparison when comparing themselves to models in ads to be either self-evaluation or self-improvement. Little evidence of self-enhancement was found. Similarly, pre-tests reported in Martin (1995) found little evidence of the use of self-enhancement motives by either male or female college students when comparing themselves to models in print ads.

Our study investigates the presence of motives in social comparison processes associated with models in print ads, and extends previous research to consider younger populations (first and fifth grade children) using a different methodology (in-depth interviews as opposed to pencil and paper instruments or projective tests). Before discussing the methodology, though, we will first review the literature that attempts to explain why the sex differences discussed earlier exist.

EXPLANATIONS FOR SEX-BASED DIFFERENCES

Burton et al. (1994), basing their discussion largely on Jackson (1992) and Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore (1985), list three rationales for the sex-based differences found consistently in relation to the importance of physical attractiveness. We will summarize those briefly.

Traditional Social Roles

The traditional view of the male role has been that of financial provider, whereas the traditional female role has not involved the work place. Bar-Tal and Saxe (1976) suggest the less "objective" criteria for judging females' successful role fulfillment has resulted in physical attractiveness being a more important evaluative cue for them.

Attractiveness as a Source of Social Power

Within many cultures, women are viewed as having less social power than men (Jackson 1992). In mate selection, men are seen as exchanging power for beauty; women are seen as using their appearance as a source of social power (Buss and Barnes 1986).

Role of Attractiveness as a Source of Status

Beauty and physical attractiveness have stronger implications for women in the determinants of their social status (Jackson 1992). Vaughn and Langlois (1983) report that the relationship between attractiveness and socioeconomic status was stronger for girls than boys.

All three explanations relate to social norms that create different expectations concerning physical attractiveness. However, the explanations do not shed much light on the process through which these differing norms are internalized by males and females. Another explanation may be found in the way that women and men view their bodies. Women often desire a thinner body, whereas men prefer a larger upper body which conveys strength. Male models, however, cannot have an exceptionally large chest or arms because the majority of advertised clothing would not be shown to its best advantage on this body type. Therefore, male models may be viewed as less than ideal by other males because they do not look strong, and perhaps are even viewed as effeminate. Our investigation of the motives for social comparison
may delineate how males seem to make themselves relatively immune to the barrage of attractive models in advertising.

METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews were conducted with first grade (19 male and 29 female) and fifth grade (21 male and 21 female) children. First graders were chosen because "basic capabilities, interest, and mature strategies relevant to social comparison are all present by six years of age" (Ruble 1983:147). However, Ruble (1983) reviewed evidence which suggests that, until at least seven or eight years of age, social comparison has little effect on children. Thus, it is believed that interviews with first graders would offer information from the earliest age at which children have the capacity to compare and at which they may be first experiencing the effects of social comparison on their selves and behaviors.

Fifth graders were selected because this is a highly sensitive time in the pubertal development of pre-adolescents. Martin (1995), in a longitudinal study, found that the mean change in self-assessed pubertal development from sixth to seventh grade females was .80 (on a five-point scale) and for the eighth to ninth grade transition .29. On the other hand, the mean change was -.19 for the fourth to fifth grade transition. This last group's aggregate physical development obviously did not reverse itself; instead, it appears that they experienced confusion as to what body size and shape are considered desirable.

Personal interviews with fifth graders should shed light on the processes occurring, as well as serving as a meaningful contrast to first graders.

The interviews were conducted by senior marketing and advertising majors taking a special projects class. Before any interviews were conducted, the students were required to read selected articles on gendered advertising and on interviewing children (the latter articles included Fine and Sandstrom [1988], Parker [1984], Patton [1990] and Weils [1965]). In addition, students participated in two training sessions on interviewing processes with children and were required to conduct a mock interview with the class instructors. The training and mock interview stressed the importance of the use of probes and the use of pre-designed questions only when the interview stalled or when the topic was changed by the child.

The interviewers began the one-on-one sessions by asking general, unstructured questions about advertising. Then the children were shown ads with attractive young models (of the same sex as the child) and asked questions such as "How does this ad make you feel?" and "How does this ad make you feel about your looks?" The ads were selected from youth-oriented publications such as Teen and Sports Illustrated Junior. Questions were also asked specifically about the different motives for comparison. For example, children were asked, "Some kids have told us that they look at models to get ideas on how they could look better. Do you ever do this?" (i.e., a question specific to the self-improvement motive). Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed.

Eleven of the 14 interviewers were female; each interviewer was to interview three male and three female children. In the authors' readings of the interviews, no differences in interview quality between female and male informants were observed within interviewers. Relatively large differences in interview quality were observed across interviewers, with some consistently able to get informants to talk at length while others generated relatively brief interviews across most
of the children. All interviewers received feedback on their interviewing style after conducting and transcribing their first interview, and the quality of the interviews generally improved after that point. Most interviewers turned their interviews in as they conducted them, and feedback was provided soon thereafter. However, a couple of the interviewers waited until the end of the semester to conduct their interviews and thus had far less feedback.

Permission from the local public school administration was obtained to contact children through the school system, and a few interviews were conducted in schools. About one third of the informants were obtained from lists obtained from schools, but the majority of the informants came through the interviewers' informal contacts. Most were conducted in the child's home with a parent present, though not sitting in on the interview (one exception was an interview conducted with a deaf child, whose father interpreted). Most of the children interviewed where white and middle class, though the percentage of African-Americans included in the study was comparable to the percentage (about five percent) in the school system. Further, about ten percent of the interviews were conducted with children who might be labeled "disadvantaged" if one were to use middle-class norms to evaluate their family status, lack of discretionary income, and residences. Each child was given two free movie passes for participating in the project.

Though the students were well prepared for the interviews, in some cases it was difficult for them to obtain articulate responses from the children. For example, one first grade interview yielded more than 30 "I don't know" responses. The interviews with the fifth graders yielded much richer responses.

The transcribed interviews were read by all three authors multiple times, with each suggesting themes which he or she saw. After general agreement as to the nature of the themes was achieved, the interviews were read and reread in order to find convergence as well as disconfirmation.

THE FREQUENT FAILURE TO MAKE SOCIAL COMPARISONS

As Ruble (1983) noted, very young children often cannot compare socially. We found that many of our first grade and male fifth grade informants did not make social comparisons. Festinger's framing of social comparison emphasizes the role of similar others, and the perceived lack of similarity between the informants and the models in the ads (taken from publications such as Teen and Sports Illustrated Junior) reduced greatly the social comparisons that took place. It should be noted that there are many more magazines with ads that feature young females than those targeted to young males; thus, it is much more likely that young females will encounter similar others in ads than will young males. Explicit comments about this dissimilarity to models were common among first graders (13 made such comments) and fifth grade males (10 comments), but only one fifth grade female made such a comment. Cole (first grade) said he did not compare himself to the model "because he is bigger; he has black hair." When asked if he would want to know the model (an early teen), Jay (first grade) said, "No, because I don't like grown-ups; they boss you around." Jeff (first grade) felt that the hair-care product being advertised was irrelevant to him. "When I get older, I will care more and will wear gel." When asked how old he
thought the model was, Micah answered "Eight," and that he liked older boys "because they know more than me." When Greg (fifth grade) was asked how the model made him feel about his looks, he responded "It's sorta hard to tell, you know, because of the age difference." Shea (first grade, African American), when asked if he wanted to be like the model in the ad, said, "No. I can't be him, because I can't turn into him."

A second explanation for the lack of social comparison on the part of some children was that the dissimilarity was due to age and size differences which they expect to disappear as they continue to age and grow. While males were more likely to acknowledge dissimilarities between themselves and the models, we found no explicit statements in their interviews that acknowledged that they would be like the models some day.

Those who expressed the belief that nature will improve them were female (both first and fifth graders). Stacey (fifth grade) said, "People always make fun of me because I'm small and young and stuff, but if I was older then I'd probably be a little bit taller and no one would make fun of me." Aly (first grade) said that the ad made her feel "good, because she might be older and older may be pretty." Rosanne (first grade) said that she would like to have the clothes advertised, because "it would make me feel a lot older...my mom thinks I'm just a plain old, plain old seven...If I were wearing clothing like that I would feel twenty, because I look stupid in my clothes."

FINDINGS' FIT WITH PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON MOTIVATIONS FOR SOCIAL COMPARISON

Our results offer a different perspective of the motives used for social comparison with physically attractive models than that found in earlier work (Martin 1995; Martin and Kennedy 1994a); those studies found that Self-Evaluation and Self-Improvement were very common motives, while Self-Enhancement was not. Our study itself differed in two very meaningful aspects: it dealt with younger children and it used in-depth interviews instead of pencil and paper and projective tests.

Self-Evaluation

Children in our interviews did self-evaluate, but not to the extent that older respondents had in earlier work. Our explanation is that many of the children (especially the younger ones and fifth grade males) did not perceive the models to be "similar others." Further, many children, especially males, did not acknowledge having socially compared themselves to the models.

If similarity to the model is perceived, there is evidence that the initial response is a very positive one. Erin (first grade) liked the model and said "she makes me feel great because I have some shorts like that." TJ (fifth grade male), when asked if he ever looked at models and felt better, said, "Yes, because sometimes their clothes are like mine." Jarrod (fifth grade) said that "sometimes I feel good cause they [the models] might look like me." Jeff (first grade) said, "I like the model, cause it makes me feel like it kind of made me feel like I'm in the picture right now. Cause the kid is like my size and stuff like that." Melanie (first grade) said, "The ad makes me feel like I look exactly like her. It's a really good feeling." Aly (first grade) said the ad made her feel
"kind of pretty, because she has curly hair and I kind of do that too." Shawn (fifth grade female) said the ad made her feel "cool; I like her and she is like me."

It may be that these comments reflect the positive self-esteem of some children which allows them to focus on the good aspects of the models in the ads. However, our interpretation of the majority of the interviews is that this positive effect associated with similarity is rather a transition stage through which most children pass. At some point, older informants start discounting parental comments about their being physically attractive (if such comments are made). Many children (especially older females) expressed the negative self-evaluations also found in much of the literature on gendered advertising targeted to older children and young adults. The majority of children, especially fifth graders, learned to note both positive and negative aspects of the ads (product, model, setting, etc.), and used the existence of negative aspects to maintain their self-esteem.

Self-Improvement

We also did not find the relative prominence of the self-improvement motive that was found through the use of pencil and paper instruments and projective tests (Martin 1995; Martin and Kennedy 1994a). Our explanation, especially for the younger children, is that they perceive that they will improve naturally, so self-comparison with models is unnecessary. "Bigger is better" and they are experiencing this process. Even some fifth grade females expressed this as well (i.e., Stacey who was concerned about being made fun of since she is short), but most such comments were from males and/or first graders. For males, improvement was assumed to continue as one matures.

A very common theme was that improvement would come from "Having, much more so than changing one's physical structure. Most of the improvement comments dealt with the improved self image that would occur if they had the products advertised. Mike (first grade) said that the model was handsome "because of his clothes."

When asked why some kids look at ads and feel worse, Micah (first grade) said it is "because they don't have very much money. They should ask their mom if they can buy something and your mom would say you should work for some money like cleaning." A self-improvement motive is clearly evident, but it is related to having and not to physical change. Similarly, Jessica (fifth grade), when asked if she wanted to be like the model, said, "No. I just want to be a lawyer so I can get the money to buy this stuff."

The interviews suggest that there is a self-improvement transition phase as well. Since young children believe they will improve physically anyway, they are concerned with "having." "Not having" is not particularly damaging to the younger children's self esteem as they are totally dependent on family for "having." Thus, "not having" and not being popular are not their faults. As they get older, having is more under their control as resources grow. For males, the "bigger is better" rationale continues into the teen years, while adolescent females discover that bigger is not better according to social norms just at a time when nature is decidedly making them bigger.

Self-enhancement

We found much evidence that self-enhancement does occur frequently among younger children, though not necessarily in the more extreme forms (avoidance; seeking downward comparisons) that Martin (1995) and
Martin and Kennedy (1994a) used when operationalizing Wood's (1989) conceptual definitions of the self-enhancement motives. These more extreme forms (avoidance, seeking downward comparisons) of self-enhancement were present in a limited fashion. Several fifth grade males made comments like Tony (fifth grade): "I don't really think about ads, just ignore it and don't really look at it." The avoidance on the part of other informants was more subtle. Erin (first grade) perceived herself to be fat and appeared to have low self-esteem as judged by her discussion of her relationships with others. She switched the discussion of the model to talking about wanting to go skiing; later she switched the topic to a friend who has "fat lips and everyone makes fun of him." Natrina (first grade) said that the ad "makes me feel terrible about my body" but then started talking about her teacher giving her stickers for good things she does. Maria (fifth grade) was more creative in her avoidance. When asked to tell a story about the model (which few informants were able or willing to do), she said, "She was climbing mountains and she fell off a mountain, and then she had a broken leg and a broken arm and a broken nose." Later when asked if she wanted to be like the model, she said, "No. I don't want to fall off a mountain.

Active avoidance of social comparison (as opposed to the more subconscious lack of social comparison due to the perceived lack of similarity) was not observed frequently enough to provide a basis for discussing possible sex differences.

A few children seemed to self-enhance by downward comparisons. Brittany (first grade) said that she looks at ads and feels better "cuz I think I look better than them." Aly (first grade) felt good about the ad "because she looks almost as pretty as I do." Raquel (first grade) said, "I feel better about the way I look when I look at models because I am prettier than them." But frequent statements revealed an implicit assumption that it is OK not to be as attractive as the models; several comments (by both males and females) were similar to Jarrod's (fifth grade), "I just like who I am."

Many respondents (over half) made statements denigrating some aspect of the ad (the setting, the product, and/or the model). Self-esteem was maintained by denigrating some characteristic of the model, or by not wanting the product, or by discounting the setting of the ad.

Criticism of the Models

In general, the informants acknowledged that the models were attractive, but they also noted physical flaws such as big ears and big noses, or personality flaws such as the desire to show off or a willingness to show too much of one's body. Nathan (first grade) said, "The model looks mean; he has mean eyes." Looking at the same model, Jacob (first grade) said he "looks cool, neat hair, shirt, but he has mean eyes." Similarly, girls found flaws in the model's bodies. Carly (first grade) said, "I don't like her hair color, it's brown." Jessica (fifth grade) did not like the model "because she just looks kind of weird because I don't like her face." Tessa (first grade) said that the model is "stupid, ugly. I don't want to know her."

Both males and females were likely to criticize the models for their "attitudes," but such comments were much more common from females. Saul (fifth grade) called the model a "wannabe." Patrick (first grade) said the model "is trying to show off or something...He's acting like oh Joe Cool and all this." Females were more articulate about the rationale for being a model. Stacey (fifth grade) said, "Part of me thinks..."
she's pretty and part of me doesn't. Like her nose isn't too big, her ears don't stick out too far, and the long hair and stuff like that. But I don't like the clothes she wears and the thing around her neck... she thinks she's showing off." Deedee (fifth grade) said that she somehow feels better about herself after viewing models "because sometimes they wear a lot of makeup and they dress sort of like not exactly the way I would dress that would make me feel better about my looks." Linda (fifth grade) reacted to the model's skimpy outfit: "I'd like to be her except I wouldn't want the problem she has. It [the dress] is too unbuttoned. I wouldn't want anybody seeing my chest or whatever. I wouldn't feel good ... exposing my body to the world." She also noted that she would not want to make the sacrifices necessary to be a model, saying that she feels good after seeing ads because "the model has to go on a crash diet and get new clothes and change hair. I wouldn't do that. I want to be myself." Numerous other such comments were made by females.

Social comparison theory has been used by marketers to investigate the relationship between the female readers and the physically attractive model in the ad. But ads are rich stimuli, and additional processes take place besides the self-comparison with the model. We suggest that these processes may help the young person maintain self esteem by finding fault with the ad itself, which then leads to a discounting of the physical attractiveness of the model in the ad.

Criticisms of the Ad Setting

Ashley (fifth grade) did not like the farm setting of one ad: "I don't like hay. She's closing her eyes; the sun must be in them." Eric (fifth grade) liked the model ("he looks like Patrick Swayze") but did not like the ad ("I don't like the writing all over it"). Emily (fifth grade) reacted negatively to the skiing context of one ad: "I don't want to go downhill. I mean, that's pretty scary, and I just don't like it." She did not like the setting of the second ad either. "I kind of know that she's not really there because she probably wouldn't be wearing something like that long on a farm, and she probably wouldn't be doing that." Michelle (fifth grade) did not like the ad because the background was "kind of weird."

Criticisms of the Products Advertised

Many children stated that they did not like the product advertised; on the other hand, several of the first graders were not correct as to what product was being advertised. Jessica (fifth grade) liked the model but not the clothes: "I think she is pretty but I don't like that shirt. I don't like the color red." She had problems with the second ad too: "I don't like this color of yellow. I like yellow, but not, you know, that sort of color." Again, she liked the model ("she looks pretty, her hair and everything") but says, "I don't like the jacket. I don't think it looks nice." Blane (first grade) thought the model was "sort of cool, sort of hot. He has stupid pants, but I like his hair." Aly (first grade) noted how long the jeans skirt was: "It is too long and if it is too long, you could trip on it." Jessica (fifth grade) said that "I don't like the thing she is wearing, because it is like these shorts and this ugly thing over it like a long skirt." Jonathon (first grade) said, "I don't like the cologne because sometimes people wear too much of it and they do not smell very good." Tessa (first grade) said that the model was pretty, but she did not like "the outfit. Wearing the dress would make me feel stupid."
Summary

Denigration of part of the ad was offered as a conscious strategy for maintaining self-esteem. When Tony (fifth grade) was asked what could be done if an ad made someone feel bad, he said, "Point out things they have—that the people in the magazines have and then find something that you have that the people in the magazines have bad that you have good." Similarly, Linda (fifth grade) noted that people who feel bad after seeing ads could be told "to think about what they have the models don't have."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings do shed light on how pre-adolescents view physically attractive models in ads as well as the fact that many do not notice the models. We found less social comparison occurring for young children and older males, as many informants saw the models as being very dissimilar from them. Males apparently do not look for similarity with models, possibly because of a negative image of "male models" as discussed earlier. It seems that the social status of a "model" is much higher for females than it is for males, as males were able to find male models more unappealing. Perhaps even more insightful is that five to ten percent of the male respondents of all ages (fourth grade through college), when asked to describe (in a projective test) the process of looking at an ad with a model in it (after having JUST looked at an ad with a male model in it), described looking at a female in the picture (Martin 1995). No females assumed that the model was male in their responses to the TATs.

The findings also suggest that the first discovery of similarity with models leads to positive affect, a phenomenon that diminishes as children age. Children find that similarity represents a positive indication that they are growing up, but later the perceived similarity leads to social comparisons with unrealistic standards.

Our findings also generate a somewhat different perspective of the relative importance of the various motives for social comparison when considering physically attractive models in advertisements. Previous research has found self-evaluation and self-improvement to be the dominant motives for social comparison, for both males and females. Pretests with college-aged young adults in Martin (1995) found that more social comparison occurs for females in general [which, again, may reflect the greater frequency attractive female models in ads], and that the relative likelihood of self-enhancement is greater for males (though still less common than self-evaluation and self-improvement). Our findings indicate that self-evaluation is not as prominent with young children as it is with older ones.

The self-improvement motive appears to go through a transition. For young children, nature satisfies the need to improve physically and the key to improvement appears to be the obtaining of the "neat" or "cool" things advertised. As one ages, resources may allow one to "have," but the social norm that "bigger is better" comes to a halt, apparently in the age range 10 to 12 for females and later for males.

Self-enhancement appears to be the dominant motive in our findings if one is willing to take a broader perspective as to what constitutes "self enhancement." Only three first grade females saw themselves as prettier than models. A few children actively avoided social comparison with models, but more (especially males) just did not see...
the relevance of making social comparisons in the first place. Most informants were critical of some aspect of the ad (the model, the product, or the setting), which allowed them to maintain their self-esteem. Future research using survey instruments should modify self-enhancement items to capture this partial denigration of the ad.

The conscious process articulated by Tony and Stacey [that children should be encouraged to find things in the ad which they have better than the model] appears to have been used subconsciously by many children. We suggest that such practices should be encouraged. If most young people continued to use such a strategy, the appealing aspects of ads may still be noted without stimulating the potential harmful effects such as eating disorders and steroid use.

To some extent, our findings that children denigrate aspects of the ad may be an artifact of the context in which the data were obtained. The children were shown ads, and they may have thought that they were to critique them. Even if this demand effect existed, the fact remains that children can denigrate aspects of ads. There is ample evidence that older children primarily self-evaluate and self-improve; it may be that these motives dominate self-enhancement once they become relevant (once social comparison processes become more frequent and once getting bigger is no longer synonymous with getting better). Our findings indicate that self-enhancement motives are prevalent for younger children, and we suggest that these tendencies should be encouraged further by business-sponsored educational efforts that train children to maintain self-esteem by denigrating aspects of the ads. We view this recommendation as a pro-active step on the part of marketers. Most nations are far more restrictive of advertising targeted to children, and we see sufficient problems in the US to merit much higher levels of regulatory concern.

NOTES

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2. A reviewer noted that the wording "Some kids have told us..." may have created a one-removed peer pressure effect. A few informants did appear to try to explain why other kids would say that, but most answered in terms of their own reactions to the idea. The wording we used was selected in an attempt to present the existence of the motives in a credible (to the informants) manner.

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